

By Winston Churchill: The Second World War

Volume VI—Triumph and Tragedy

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INSTALLMENT 18—SOVIET SUSPICIONS

Book II—The Iron Curtain

Unconditional Surrender and Military Capitulation—General Wolff Meets Mr. Allan Dulles in Switzerland, March 8—A Second Meeting, March 19—Molotov's Insults—Eisenhower's Stalin's Telegram to the President.

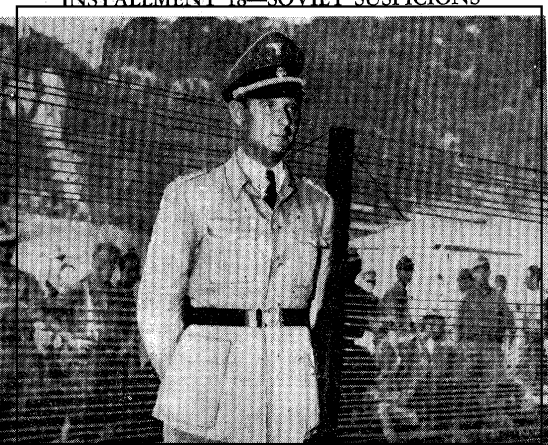
WHILE all the vexations of the Soviet abandonment of the spirit of Yalta were the subject of the prolonged correspondence set forth in the preceding chapter, a far more bitter and important interchange was taking place between the British and American Governments and the Soviet Government. By the middle of February (1945) the Nazi Reich was finished and he would die with it. But several of his followers had made secret approaches to the English-speaking Allies. All these proposals were of course rejected. Our terms were unconditional surrender on all fronts. At the same time our commanders in the field were always fully authorised to accept purely military capitulations of the enemy forces which opposed them, and an attempt to arrange this while we were fighting on the Rhine led to a harsh exchange between the Russians and the President, whom I supported. In February General Karl Wolff, the commander of the S. S. in Italy, had got into touch through Italian intermediaries with the American Intelligence Service in Switzerland. It was decided to examine the credentials of the persons involved, and the link was given the code name "Crossword". On March 13 General Wolff himself appeared at Zurich and met Mr. Allan Dulles, the head of the American organisation. Wolff was bluntly told that there was no question of negotiations, and that if the matter were pursued it could only be on the basis of unconditional surrender. This information was speedily conveyed to Allied Headquarters in Italy and to the American, British, and Soviet Governments. On March 13 General Airey and General Lemnitzer, British and American Chiefs of Staff in Caserta, went in disguise to Switzerland, and six days later, on March 19, a second exploratory meeting was held with General Wolff.

I realised at once that the Soviet Government might be suspicious of a separate military surrender in the South, which would leave our armies to advance against reduced opposition as far as Vienna and beyond, or indeed towards the Elbe or Berlin. Moreover, as all our fronts round Germany were part of the whole Allied effort, the Russians would naturally be affected by anything done on any one of them. If any contacts were made with the enemy, formal or informal, they ought to be told in good time. This rule was scrupulously followed. I was at no stage any question of concealing anything from the Russians. The Allied representatives then in Switzerland even explored ways of suggesting a Russian officer in to join the Soviet Government wished to send someone. On March 20 Mr. Eden accordingly instructed our Ambassador in Moscow to inform the Soviet Government yet again that the only basis of the meetings was to make sure that the Germans had authority to negotiate a military surrender. This he did. Two days later Molotov handed him a written reply, which contained the following expressions:

In Berne for two weeks, behind the backs of the Soviet Union, which is bearing the brunt of the war against Germany, negotiations have been going on between the representatives of the German military command on the one hand and representatives of the English and American commands on the other. Sir Archibald Clark Kerr of course explained that the Soviet had misunderstood what had occurred and that these "negotiations" were no more than an attempt to test the credentials and authority of General Wolff. Molotov's comment was blunt and insulting. "In this instance," he wrote, "the Soviet Government sees not a misunderstanding, but something worse." He attacked Mr. Harriman [the United States Ambassador] as justly bitter. In the face of so astonishing a charge it seemed to me that silence was better than a contest in abuse.

At the same time it was necessary to warn our military commanders in the West. I accordingly showed Molotov's letter both to Montgomery and to Eisenhower, with whom I at this time was watching the crossing of the Rhine. Since Eisenhower was much upset, and seemed deeply stirred with anger at what he considered most unjust and unfounded charges about our good faith. He said that as a military commander he would accept the unconditional surrender of any body of enemy troops on his front, from a company to the entire Army, that he regarded this as a purely military matter, and that he had full authority to accept a surrender without asking for anybody's opinion. If however political matters arose he would immediately consult the Governments. He feared that if the Russians were brought into the picture, they would be Kesselring's forces which could be settled by himself in an hour might be prolonged for three or four weeks, with heavy losses to our troops. He made it clear that he would insist upon the troops under the officer making the surrender laying down their arms and standing still until they received further orders, so that there would be no possibility of their being transferred across Germany to fight the Russians. He would also at the same time advance through these surrendered troops as fast as possible to the East. I thought myself that these matters should be left to his discretion, and that the Governments should only intervene if any political issues arose. I did not see why we should break our hearts if, owing to mass surrenders in the West, we got to the Elbe, or even farther, before Stalin.

I minutes to Mr. Eden on March 25: "I am to see Eisenhower to-morrow at



EMISSARY: Gen. Karl Wolff, the commander of the S. S. in Italy, got in touch with the American Intelligence Service in Switzerland in 'an attempt to negotiate surrender terms. He is shown after he was taken prisoner of war in Bolzano, Italy, and interned in an Allied camp.



MEETING: EMISSARY: Allan Dulles, left, the head of the American Intelligence Service in Switzerland, and Maj. Gen. T. S. Airey, center, and Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, the British and American Chiefs of Staff in Caserta, met General Wolff in Zurich. This meeting irritated the Russians.

no message, as of course the views of the negotiations may easily be changed to his theatre. I well understand the Russian anxiety lest we should accept a military surrender in the West or South, which means that our armies will advance against little or no opposition and will reach the Elbe, or even Berlin before the Bear. * * * In my view the Russians are not in from the start, and we should carry on in accordance with our duty, our obvious advantage, and our plain right. They are claiming to have everything yielded to them at every point, and give nothing in return except their military pressure, which has never yet been exerted except in their own interest. They ought to be made to feel that we also have our point of view. * * *

On April 5 I received from the President the startling text of his interchanges with Stalin. These were the telegrams:

Marshall Stalin to President Roosevelt 7 Apr 45 I have received your message on the question of negotiations in Berne. You are absolutely right that, in connection with the affair regarding negotiations of the Anglo-American command with the German command somewhere in Berne or some other place, "has developed an atmosphere of fear and distrust deserving regrets."

You insist that there have been no negotiations yet. It may be assumed that you have not yet been fully informed. As regards my military colleagues, they, on the basis of data which they have on hand, do not have any doubts that the negotiations have taken place, and they have ended in an agreement to permit the Anglo-American troops to advance to the east, and the Anglo-Americans have promised in return to ease for the Germans the peace terms.

I think that my colleagues are close to the truth. Otherwise one could not have understood the fact that the Anglo-Americans have refused to admit to Berne representatives of the Soviet command for participation in the negotiations with the Germans. I also cannot understand the silence of the British, who have allowed you to correspond with me on this unpleasant matter, and yet themselves remain silent, although it is known that the initiative in this whole affair with the negotiations in Berne belongs to the British. I understand that there are certain advantages for the Anglo-American troops as a result of these separate negotiations in Berne or some other place, since the Anglo-Americans troops get the possibility to advance into the heart of Germany without encountering resistance on the part of the Germans, but why was it necessary to conceal this from the Russians, and were your Allies, the Russians, not notified?

As a result of this at the present moment the Germans on the Western Front in fact have ceased the war against England and the United States. At the same time the Germans continue the war with Russia, the Ally of England and the United States. It is understandable that such a situation can in no way serve the cause of preservation of the strength of trust between our countries. This accusation angered the President deeply. His strength did not allow him to draft his own reply. General Marshall framed the following answer with Roosevelt's approval. It certainly did not lack vigour.

President Roosevelt to Marshall Stalin 5 Apr 45

I have received with astonishment your message of April 3 containing an allegation that arrangements which were made between Field-Marshal Alexander and Kesselring at Berne "permitted the Anglo-American troops to advance to the east, and the Anglo-Americans promised in return to ease for the Germans the peace terms."

In my previous messages to you in regard to the attempts made in Berne to arrange a negotiation to discuss a surrender of the German Army in Italy I have told you that (i) whatever the result of such a negotiation, (ii) that in any surrender of the enemy Army in Italy there could be no viola-

surrender, (iv) that Soviet officers would be welcomed at any meeting that might be arranged to discuss surrender. For the advantage of our common war effort against Germany, which to-day gives excellent promise of an early success in a disintegration of the German armies, I must continue to assume that you have the same high confidence in my truthfulness and reliability that I have always had in yours.

I have also a full appreciation of the effect your gallant Army has had in making possible a crossing of the Rhine by the forces under General Eisenhower, and the effect that your forces will have hereafter on the eventual collapse of the German resistance to our combined attacks. I have complete confidence in General Eisenhower, and know that he certainly would inform me before entering into any agreement with the Germans. He is instructed to demand, and will demand, unconditional surrender of enemy troops that can be defeated on his front. Our invasions of the Western Front are due to military action. Their speed has been attributable mainly to the terrific impact of air-power, to the destruction of German communications, and to the fact that Eisenhower was able to cripple the bulk of the German forces on the Western Front while they were still west of the Rhine.

I am certain that there were no negotiations in Berne at any time, and I feel that your information to that effect must have come from German sources, which have made persistent efforts to create dissension between us in order to escape in some measure responsibility for their war crimes. If that was Wolff's purpose in Berne your message proves that he has not succeeded.

With a confidence in your belief in my personal reliability and in my determination to bring about together with you an unconditional surrender of the Nazis, it is astonishing that a belief seems to have reached the Soviet Government that I have entered into an agreement with the enemy without first obtaining your full agreement.

Finally I would say this: it would be one of the great tragedies of history if at the very moment of the victory now within our grasp such distrust, such lack of faith, should prejudice the entire undertaking after the colossal losses of life, material, and treasure involved. Frankly, I cannot avoid a feeling of bitter resentment toward your informers, whoever they are, for such a misrepresentation of my actions or those of my trusted subordinates.

I WAS deeply struck by this last sentence, which I print in italics. I felt that although Mr. Roosevelt did not draft the whole message he might well have added this final stroke himself. It looked like an addition or summing up, and it seemed like Roosevelt himself in anger.

Next day I addressed Stalin myself.

Prime Minister to Marshall Stalin 6 Apr 45

The President has sent me his correspondence with you in regard to the negotiations in Switzerland between a British and an American officer on Field-Marshal Alexander's staff and a German general named Wolff relating to possible surrender of Kesselring's army in Northern Italy. I therefore deem it right to send you a concise summary of the action of His Majesty's Government. As soon as we learned of these contacts we immediately informed the Soviet Government on March 12, and we and the United States Government have faithfully reported to you everything that has taken place. The sole and only business mentioned or referred to in any way in Switzerland was to test the credentials of the German emissary and try to arrange a meeting between a nominee of Kesselring's with Field-Marshal Alexander at his headquarters or some convenient point in Northern Italy. There were no negotiations in Switzerland even for a military surrender of Kesselring's army. Still less did any political-military talk, as alleged in your telegram to the President, enter into our thoughts, which are not, as suggested, of so dishonourable a character. I am sure that you will be satisfied with this request to parley by the German General Wolff was one of those attempts which

Mr. Roosevelt's Reproach, April 5—My Telegram to Stalin of April 6—His Replies, April 7—The Semblance of an Apology—Mr. Roosevelt's Telegram of April 12.

sowing distrust between Allies. Field-Marshal Alexander made this point in a telegram sent on March 11, in which he remarks, "Please note that two of the leading figures are S.S. and Himmler men, which makes me very suspicious." This telegram was repeated to the British Ambassador in Moscow on March 12 and communicated to the Soviet Government. If to sow distrust between us was the German intention it has certainly for the moment been successful.

After quoting some of the more insulting phrases from Molotov's letter I continued: In the interests of Anglo-Russian relations His Majesty's Government decided not to make any reply to this most wounding and unfounded charge, but to ignore it. This is the reason for what you call in your message to the President "the silence of the British." We thought it better to keep silent than to respond to such a message as was sent by M. Molotov, but you may be sure that we were astonished by it and affronted that M. Molotov should impute such conduct to us. This however in no way affected our instructions to Field-Marshal Alexander to keep you fully informed.

* * * Neither is it true that the initiative in this matter came, as you state to the President, wholly from the British. In fact the information given to Field-Marshal Alexander that the German General Wolff wished to make a contact in Switzerland was brought to him by an American agency. * * *

With regard to the charges which you have made in your message to the President of April 3, which also asperse His Majesty's Government, I associate myself and my colleagues with the last sentence of the President's reply.

On April 7 Stalin replied to the President's approach.

Marshall Stalin to President Roosevelt 7 Apr 45

Your message of April 5 received. In my message of April 3 the point at issue is not that of integrity and trustworthiness. I have never doubted your integrity and trustworthiness or Mr. Churchill's either. My point is that in the course of our correspondence it has become evident that our views differ on the point as to what is admissible and what is inadmissible as between one ally and another. We Russians think that in the present situation on the fronts, when the enemy is faced with inevitable surrender, if the representatives of any one ally ever meet the Germans to discuss surrender the representatives of another ally should be afforded an opportunity of participating in such a meeting. * * *

2. It is difficult to admit that the lack of resistance by the Germans on the Western Front is due solely to the fact that they have been defeated. The Germans have divisions on the Eastern Front. They could without prejudicing their own position detach fifteen to twenty divisions from the Eastern Front and transfer them to reinforce their troops on the Western Front. Yet the Germans have not done and are not doing this. They are continuing to wage a crazy struggle with the Russians for an insignificant railway station like Zernyants in Czechoslovakia, which is as much use to them as hot potatoes to a corpse, and yet they yield without a struggle to the Russian forces in the centre of Germany as Osnabrück, Mannheim, and Kassel. You will agree that such behaviour on the part of the Germans is more than curious and unintelligible.

3. As regards my informants, I can assure you that they are extremely honest and modest people who discharge their duties conscientiously and have no intention of offending anyone. We have very often put these people to a practical test. Judge for yourselves. In February General Marshall sent the Soviet General Staff a number of important reports, in which he warned the Russians, on the basis of data in his possession, that in March there would be two serious counter-attacks by the German Army on the Eastern Front—one would be aimed from Pomerania against Thorn and the other from the region of Moravia Ostrava against Lodz. In actual fact however it turned out that the Germans' main blow was being prepared and was directed not in the directions above-mentioned, but in an entirely different area, namely, in the neighbourhood of Lake Balaton, south-west of Budapest. This was one of the heaviest attacks of the whole war, with such a large concentration of tank forces. Marshal Tukhachev was able to avoid a catastrophe and subsequently inflict a smashing defeat on the Germans, because, among other reasons, my agents discovered, though somewhat tardily, this plan. I am sure that you will be able to convince yourself how conscientious and well-informed Soviet agents are. * * *

He also sent a copy of his telegram to me, together with the following personal message: Marshall Stalin to Prime Minister 7 Apr 45

* * * I consider it necessary to make the following remarks.

1. Neither I nor Molotov had any intention of "blackening" anyone, or of having developed differing points of view as regards the rights and obligations of any ally. You will see from my message to the President that the Russian point of view on this question is the correct one, as it guarantees such ally's rights and delivers the enemy of any possibility of sowing discord between us.

2. My messages are personal and strictly confidential. This makes it possible to speak one's mind clearly and frankly. This is the advantage of confidential communications. If however you are going to regard my statement of mine as offensive it will make this kind of communication very difficult. I can assure you that I had and have no intention of offending anyone.

I passed this to Roosevelt, with the following comment: Prime Minister to President Roosevelt 12 Apr 45

I have a feeling that this is about the best we are going to get out of them, and certainly it is as near as they can get to an apology. However, before considering any answer at all from His Majesty's Government please tell me how you think the matter should be handled so that we may keep in line together.

President Roosevelt to Prime Minister 12 Apr 45

I would minimise the general Soviet problems as much as possible, because these problems, in one form or another, seem to arise every day, and most of them straighten out, as in the case of the Berne meeting. We must be firm however, and our course thus far is correct.

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Tomorrow's installment: Who enters Berlin